

ritates the narrator with her lack of education; the grandmother, the narrator learns, does not give her love equally to all the members of the family. A younger sister dies, the grandfather dies, toward the end—causing the most grief—the grandmother dies.

All this is given to us simply and unsentimentally, and so too is a sense of what it is like to grow up—to learn more, to see more, to experience the bewilderment at the responsibilities toward the self and others that growing up involves.

BUT *The Fertile Plain* is not by any means an unhappy book. The narrator is grateful for what life offered to her—she liked school, and loved some of her teachers; she liked listening to her grandmother's stories; she read; she enjoyed the decorum of the religious festivals, the friendships with girls at her school. These are all taken at their full value, without hindsight, comments of superiority from the present, or unchecked nostalgia, or regret, or anything else unnecessary to the re-creation of things as they were.

An impressive example of this scrupulousness is the last chapter, which tells what happened in 1917 when the news of the revolution came to the town. It is quite unlike anything one might expect. Crowds walked in the streets, bands played, processions marched aimlessly about, the clergy came out in their robes and blessed the crowds and the revolution, everyone was casually and absurdly happy. In a previous chapter we are told in relation to the later adventures of one character, "By then we were in the thick of a terrible civil war. Alexander's parents had been killed in a pogrom and only people like mother continued to say 'unheard of'. . . . Everything by then was unheard of." That is almost the only sentence in the book which tells us of what was to happen as a result of the revolution which was celebrated that afternoon; but neither that nor anything else is permitted to despoil the memory of the afternoon. Because the narrator is unashamed of the happiness she shared with everyone else, she can recall it in its fulness, and it is from this that the chapter derives its especial poignance.

Mrs. Salaman has approached the English language from the outside—in the short extracts given above the reader can possibly feel as un-English the rhythms of the language, the way the words are put together. They are

not the less effective for being that. Again and again even the reader who knows the Russian masters only in translation cannot but be reminded that it must have been from Tolstoy and Turgenev and Chekhov that Mrs. Salaman learned how to write. It is the measure of *The Fertile Plain* that in its modest way it does succeed in putting itself into a literary relationship with these writers, and that from them it can claim to be decently, legitimately descended.

### Slavery Reviewed

THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION: SLAVERY IN THE ANTE-BELLUM SOUTH. By KENNETH M. STAMPP. Knopf. 436 pp. \$5.75.

Reviewed by DAVID DONALD

CURRENT American historiography is atavistic. Revisionists reject the findings of historians of their fathers' generation, only to assert truths that would have seemed commonplace to their grandparents. After angrily demolishing Charles A. Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution, Robert E. Brown has left us with a surprisingly conventional view of the Critical Period;\* an expert recently commented that George Bancroft's is still the best account of that era. Because they so emphatically reinforce 19th-century stereotypes about the Old Man Eloquent, Samuel Flagg Bemis's two lovingly written volumes on John Quincy Adams have seemed to some an exercise in ancestral piety. The moral issue as a cause of the Civil War, which last generation's revisionists decently buried, has been resurrected in a manner that would greatly have pleased H. E. Von Holst, and other writers are now finding that their grandparents were right in thinking highly of the Radical Republicans during Reconstruction.† The masters of American business are no longer considered robber barons but, just as in 1890, industrial statesmen, and one expects any day William McKinley to be defended as a major conservative statesman.

\*So christened by John Fiske in the *Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789*. For an appraisal of Brown, see Richard Hofstadter's "Reading the Constitution Anew" in COMMENTARY, September 1956.

†See T. Harry Williams's "Thaddeus Stevens: An American Radical" in COMMENTARY, June 1956.



The latest example of this historiographical traditionalism is Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution*, an elaborate and comprehensive history of Negro slavery in the antebellum South. Mr. Stampp, a young professor of history at the University of California, already well known for two previous excellent books on the Civil War generation, rejects completely the work which has, for a generation, been the standard study in this field. Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*, first published in 1918, was written by a Southerner who had an abiding affection for his native region and who thought of Negroes amiably but condescendingly as an inferior race. Plantations seemed to Phillips "the best schools yet invented for the mass training of that sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of the American negroes represented." In his view slavery was only in part a labor system; it was a way of life and a pattern of race adjustment. Not economically advantageous to the South as a whole, or even to the owners of Negroes, slavery "kept money scarce, population sparse and land values . . . low. . . . But . . . it maintained order and a notable degree of harmony in a community where confusion worse confounded would not have been far to seek." Though it produced "injustice, oppression, brutality and heartburning," it also encouraged "gentleness, kind-hearted friendship and mutual loyalty" between the races. Phillips concluded that "it is impossible to agree that its basis and its operations were wholly evil, the law and the prophets to the contrary notwithstanding."

Mr. Stampp will have none of this magnolias-and-happy-pickaninnies approach. Slavery seems to him not a way of life but simply "a systematic method of controlling and exploiting labor." As a labor system, it was grim and unhappy, but profitable. Slaves worked hard; "the labor of the vast majority . . . ranged from what was normally expected of free labor in that period to levels that were clearly excessive." Far from being happy in chains, Negroes "longed for liberty and resisted bondage as much as any people could have done in their circumstances." To keep these reluctant laborers under control, the whites had to resort to "rigid discipline"; "without the power to punish, which the state conferred upon the master, bondage could not have existed." Though the "great majority" of slave-owners "preferred to use as little violence as possible," acts of cruelty were not exceptional

and "a certain amount of savagery was inevitable." Many Southern planters made their profits from breeding slaves for the market, and the slave trade, though held in low repute by fastidious Southerners, was a necessary part of the whole system of Negro bondage. Slaves were poorly cared for; "most of them were limited to the bare necessities and lived at the subsistence level." Far from serving as a school in which Negroes were civilized, slavery "was in its essence a process of infantilization"; it "took away from the African his native culture and gave him, in exchange, little more than his vocational training." In fact, for the peculiar institution, which condemned the Southern blacks to bondage and made "the master class unfit to live easily in a society of free men," there was only one justification—that it paid. In 1860 the institution was "still functioning profitably." The "average slaveholder earned a reasonably satisfactory return upon his investment in slaves" and "the owner of a large slave gang earned a proportionately higher return on his investment than the owner of a small gang."

IN SHORT, Mr. Stampp has challenged every point of U. B. Phillips's argument in a book that is, in many ways, a highly commendable one. In the preparation of this study, Mr. Stampp carefully searched newspaper and manuscript collections in almost every Southern state, and he has also mastered the enormous secondary literature about Negro slavery. A model of accuracy and correctness, *The Peculiar Institution* is lucidly written, and its case is argued with great cogency. Perhaps the author is most to be praised because he has avoided pussyfooting. On a subject whose issues are so controversial and whose sources so complex, there are many temptations to equivocate, but Mr. Stampp has thoughtfully considered every important historical issue raised by Negro slavery, has thoroughly examined the sources on the subject, and has forcefully and succinctly taken a stand. *The Peculiar Institution*, then, is one of the most important and provocative works on Southern history to appear in our generation.

Yet, though fresh and new, *The Peculiar Institution* is not, in every way, an improvement upon Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*. The older work must still be consulted for the early history of American slavery, since Mr. Stampp brushes off the pre-1830 "setting" in



a brief first chapter. Then, too, Phillips must be read for the changing pattern of American slavery in the pre-Civil War decades, for Mr. Stamppp views the institution as "rigid and static" during these years, and examines it "institutionally with only slight regard for chronology."

Several years ago Mr. Stamppp wrote an article attacking Phillips for "generalizing about the whole [slavery] regime from an unrepresentative sample," but it is clear that his sources have led him into much the same difficulty. Negro slaves wrote little during this period, and ordinary small white farmers, who formed the great bulk of the Southern population and owned about half of all the slaves, rarely kept elaborate diaries or records. The manuscript records extant have little to say about the thousands of hired slaves or about the 400,000 urban slaves in the South. Like his predecessor, Mr. Stamppp has had to base his book chiefly upon records left by the large slaveholders, and, as a result, *The Peculiar Institution* is, like Phillips's earlier work, essentially a study of slavery on the big plantations—on which admittedly a minority both of slaves and of slaveholders resided.

Parts of Mr. Stamppp's argument rest more upon inference and moral indignation than upon evidence. What the Negro slave himself thought, Mr. Stamppp attempts to reconstruct from very sparse records, from the highly unrepresentative writings of escaped slaves like Frederick Douglass, and from "the logic of their situation." No evidence is given to support his contention that "young males . . . bearing the South's most distinguished names" more frequently practiced miscegenation than any other white group; Mr. Stamppp has the grace to label this generalization as only "probable." His evidence that Southern masters bred slaves for the market is unconvincing, and his treatment of this sensitive point fails to take into consideration Avery Craven's sensible observation that, in those days before birth control was widely known, all Southern families, white and black, were equally large. Mr. Stamppp's argument that slavery was, despite the repeated declarations of so many slaveholders, a profitable institution rests, not upon the careful profit-and-loss accounting which led Charles Sydnor and Allan Nevins to the exactly opposite conclusion, but upon inference. "As long as slavery showed no sign of decline or decay, it *must have been* [my italics] justifying itself economically. . . ."

On many major matters Mr. Stamppp's evidence is indisputably correct, but his conclusions often seem to ignore the historical setting. Before judging whether it was inhumane to feed the average slave a "peck of corn meal and three or four pounds of salt pork" each week, one would have to know what free white workers in the South were receiving at the same time. Brutality and violence were often exercised against the slave, just as Mr. Stamppp contends, but John Hope Franklin has recently reminded us, in *The Militant South*, that they were certainly not practiced against Negroes alone. The Southern slave codes were as brutal as Mr. Stamppp alleges (though in practice they were seldom enforced in their full rigor), but, as Richard B. Morris has demonstrated, free labor in the South operated under laws concerning indentureship, apprenticeship, and vagabondage nearly as harsh.

THERE is in Mr. Stamppp's thinking a certain a-historical turn, so often characteristic of deeply committed liberals. Like every intelligent modern American, he knows that psychological and anthropological studies demonstrate that "Negroes and whites have approximately the same intellectual potentialities." From this premise he concludes "that innately Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less." For him, then, there cannot be any genuine problem of race adjustment in the South; slavery was merely a monstrous evil. Such an argument, however logical, ignores the old but still valid injunction of W. A. Dunning that "influence on the sequence of human affairs has been exercised, not by what really happened, but by what men erroneously believed to have happened," since men act upon "the error that passes as history at the time, not from the truth that becomes known long after." Negro slaves may, as Mr. Stamppp thinks, have been ready for complete assimilation into a free American society when only one generation out of Africa—but their masters certainly did not think so. Southern slave codes, Southern violence, then Southern insistence upon separation of the races were evidence of a very real fear, not of some avaricious desire to keep a docile labor force in subjection.

Mr. Stamppp's book, so admirable in many ways, is long on morality, short on historical understanding. It repudiates Phillips, but it contains nothing that would offend an aboli-



tionist of a hundred years ago. Perhaps the weaknesses of this important and provocative book should serve as a warning to the new American traditionalists that ancestral piety in historical writing has its limitations.

### An American Writer

THE LETTERS OF THOMAS WOLFE. Edited by ELIZABETH NOWELL. Scribner's. 797 pp. \$10.00.

*Reviewed by* MILTON HINDUS

CHARACTERISTICALLY, this book of Wolfe's letters is a behemoth. Wolfe was one of those writers—and there were better ones than he who did the same thing (e.g. Rabelais and Whitman)—who never used one word where three might serve just as well. He emphatically did not believe in the virtue of concentration and vigorously defended his own position against Scott Fitzgerald's friendly recommendation to him of the attractions of "the novel of selected incidents." Wolfe replied to Fitzgerald (in a letter printed here but already available to us in *The Crack-Up*): "You say that the great writer like Flaubert has consciously left out the stuff that Bill or Joe will come along presently and put in. Well, don't forget, Scott, that a great writer is not only a leaver-outer but also a putter-inner, and that Shakespeare and Cervantes and Dostoevsky were great putter-inners—greater putter-inners in fact, than taker-outers—and they will be remembered for what they put in—remembered, I venture to say, as long as Monsieur Flaubert will be remembered for what he left out."

Wolfe was perfectly right, though not perhaps as regards his own work—which was what Fitzgerald was talking about. The final result alone counts. We may become impatient with a wordy writer, but if he manages to transmute quantity into power, we are not going to complain. With Wolfe, unfortunately, it wasn't always so. He gives the impression sometimes of a man being buffeted by a high wind and unable to distinguish the wind from inspiration. That is not, I confess, how he appeared to me when I was an undergraduate and he was, together with Romain Rolland, one of my favorite writers. But the years have not been kind to either Wolfe or Rolland. There are certain books which go to pieces for us without our ever rereading them. Our ex-

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